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What you Should Know about Hypertension



Risk factors

There are several factors that put people at risk for hypertension. Increasing age, gender, heredity and race are factors that cannot be controlled. Elderly individuals are especially encouraged to undergo regular screening for the presence of hypertension because the condition is so prevalent in this population and is treatable once identified. Men are generally at greater risk than women. However, as women age, their risk increases with the onset of menopause and such that later in life, their risk exceeds men's. Heredity can be a risk factor if one or more parents are diagnosed with hypertension. African Americans are at greater risk for developing hypertension than Caucasians. Controllable risk factors are lifestyle related: obesity, diet, lack of exercise, stress, the use of certain medications, smoking and excessive alcohol consumption.

Symptoms

For many people hypertension often remains undiagnosed when they are asymptomatic (have no symptoms). However, some people may experience one or more of the following symptoms of hypertension: headache, dizziness, irregular or rapid heartbeat, nosebleeds, fatigue and blurred vision.

Complications

Left untreated, hypertension can cause many complications. Artery walls thicken and harden. The elasticity or stretchiness in the arteries decreases as well, requiring the heart to work harder to pump blood through the arteries. As the heart struggles to pump harder, its muscle walls can grow larger. An enlarged heart can cause the heart to pump improperly, leading to possible fluid back up in the lungs (a condition known as diastolic heart failure). A consistently elevated blood pressure hastens the formation of plaque or fatty deposits within the blood vessels, which causes atherosclerosis (or hardening of the arteries). Atherosclerosis can lead to an increased risk of heart attack or stroke.

Kidneys, which filter waste from the body, are also vulnerable to damage as a result of high blood pressure. Hypertension can cause the arteries feeding the kidneys to become thickened and effectively constricted. This condition can lead to progressive kidney damage and ultimate failure. Eyes, too, can suffer the ill-effects of hypertension. The retinas may be damaged because of increased pressure in blood vessels in the eyes. Loss of vision may result.

Source: National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute. The Seventh Report of the Joint National Committee on Prevention, Detection, Evaluation, and Treatment of High Blood Pressure. *Journal of the American Medical Association*. May 2003; 289:2573-2574



The vision of the Whitehall Cardiovascular Disease Task Force is to improve the heart health of all Whitehall residents.